



Leverage — How U.S. Aid Outpaced Cold War Ambitions in Afghanistan

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Abstract

This article studies the connection between U.S. military aid to the Afghan Mujahedeen during the Soviet Afghan War (1979-1989) and the rise of Islamist militias in Afghanistan during the 1990s. Funding for the Mujahedeen during the conflict exceeded over \$3 billion between the Carter and Reagan presidencies, and these funds were later used by Islamist insurgents during the Afghan civil wars. However, the reasons behind the U.S. support are poorly understood. The article explores U.S. State Department and National Security Council documents to suggest that U.S. aid for the Mujahedeen was primarily given to repair US-Pakistani relations and humiliate Cold War rivals rather than to support an independent Afghanistan. The article argues that contemporary foreign policy goals motivated the United States to fund the Islamist organizations that would later become Al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban.

Keywords: islamism, history, mujahedeen, Middle Eastern Studies, Afghanistan, Cold War, Soviet-Afghan War

Introduction

On the evening of December 27, 1979 the highest arbiters of American foreign policy met in Washington, DC. From Foggy Bottom came Cyrus Vance, President Jimmy Carter's Secretary of State, along with his deputy secretary and undersecretaries. Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, who helped design nuclear warheads in the 1950s, was there with his deputy, as was Stansfield Turner, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency. From the White House were Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's National Security Advisor, with his deputy David Aaron, and the Vice President of the United States, Walter Mondale. The topic on the table was the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan; that morning, the Soviet Union had seized the country with 80,000 soldiers, tanks, and armored vehicles. Now, Vance, Brown, and the others—the President's Policy Review Committee—planned to force the Soviets out.

The plan began with a prodigious number of weapons and military equipment supplied to Afghan rebels opposing the Soviet occupation. Military aid alone—"...anti-aircraft guns...anti-

tank weapons, AK-47 rifles and 82mm mortars” (Zierler & Howard, 2010, Document 231)—was sizeable, but the bulk of U.S. spending would be \$695,000 in non-military aid with further support from Saudi Arabia, an American ally. Pakistan was promised an equal measure of support and some control over arming the Afghans. India, who had no love for Pakistan but even less love for the Soviets, was slated its own aid. If the West were to counter the Soviets, South Asia would need an arsenal of American military aid and the skills to operate it.

“We would have to give training on the RPG-7 anti-tank weapon,” Turner mentioned. “The way we would do it would be to train Pakistanis who then in turn could train Afghans.”

Newsom glanced at Turner, brow raised. “Would this program give us more leverage in dealing with these amorphous rebel groups?”

“That depends on what your goal is,” replied Frank Carlucci, Turner’s Deputy Director. “These weapons won’t enable [the rebel groups] to take over the country.”

After two hours of deliberation, the Policy Review Committee adjourned for the day. Their meeting on December 27, though unique in the context of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, was only one of dozens held under presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. Between 1977 and 1989, these meetings decided the fate of South Asia and the Middle East: whose soldiers would be armed, whose deals would be honored, and whose regimes would stand. The Afghan Mujahedeen, referred to as “amorphous rebel groups” by Newsom in that December session, were at the forefront of Cold War politics in 1979. Outwardly, their dogged opposition to the Soviet Union earned them the sympathy of the West and the support of the United States and its allies. Within popular history of the conflict, this is where the dynamics of the US-Mujahedeen relationship end—a patron and client united against communism. However, diplomatic records and intelligence documents unravel greater American ambitions for solidifying influence in Pakistan and hastening the end of the Cold War.

This article argues that these ambitions overshadowed any genuine support for the mission of the Mujahedeen. Though the United States officially supported an independent Afghanistan, aid for the Mujahedeen was primarily a means for the United States to warm its then-frigid relations with Pakistan and continue its opposition to the USSR. Under Carter, support for Afghanistan placated Pakistan at a time when its view of the United States was especially poor. Under Reagan, aid reflected the administration’s commitments against communism, not its genuine interest in Afghan sovereignty, as this article will discuss. Rather

than supporting a fight for freedom, the United States saw the conflict in Afghanistan as another opportunity to stack the Cold War against Moscow. The Afghan Mujahedeen were simply a means to an end in the context of the power struggle.

This view of the conflict is not necessarily new or unique, but it is important for understanding the US-Islamist relationship in Afghanistan today. Throughout history, great powers—the United States included—have made use of proxies and temporary alliances to gain advantages over their rivals. For the Cold War, the Afghan Mujahedeen were of the same vein as the Nicaraguan Contras and the Angolan UNITA—armed proxies for U.S. foreign policy. However, the manner in which the U.S. support the Mujahedeen allowed for its development into today's Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda. Carter and Reagan, focused on their respective political goals, allowed their foreign aid to mix with the insurgency's most volatile elements. This focus on Pakistani reconciliation and Cold War aims, mixed with disregard for the Mujahedeen's longevity, became a volatile mix. This article will explore this perspective of the US-Islamist relationship—one overshadowed and undone by Cold War expedience.

A Summary of the Soviet-Afghan War, 1979-1989

Before exploring this relationship, it is important to discuss the Soviet-Afghan War and the unrest that preceded it. A 1978 coup had propelled local communists, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), into power. The new regime, led by Nur Muhammad Taraki, courted the Soviet support, but the domestic situation quickly degraded as Taraki enforced . The new power created animosity between the PDPA's principal factions—the hardline-communist Khalq and socialist Parcham—and between Taraki and his foreign minister, Hafizullah Amin. Outside the party, Taraki's pursuit of land reform, secularization, and centralization nurtured popular opposition, especially from conservative Muslims. Beyond economic and material aid, the Soviets refused to send military support on Taraki's behalf. For Moscow, direct intervention would only exacerbate the situation and draw Western resentment.

In September 1979, Amin ousted Taraki and attempted to moderate his predecessor's reforms, but it was too late. By then, public dissent towards Taraki's regime had evolved into armed uprisings across the country, beginning with the Herat revolt in March. Moscow, which had hoped to guide Taraki, feared Amin's inability to quell public unrest would give the United States a strategic advantage in South Asia following the Iranian Revolution. Thus, top Soviet leadership agreed to replace Amin and take direct control of the Afghan conflict. Throughout

November 1979, Soviet forces began entering Afghanistan under the guise of providing military support. On December 27, as the Afghan military was performing exercises away from Kabul, Soviet troops seized the city's airfields, executed Amin, and installed a new satellite regime under the Parchamist Babrak Karmal.

The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan saw the deployment of 620,000 Soviet military personnel over the course of a decade. Throughout the early 1980s, Soviet victories in the field were outweighed by the growth and tenacity of the Afghan insurgents, who opposed the Soviet occupation as imperialism and viewed Karmal as a Westernized puppet. Support from rural centers, as well as from benefactors like the United States, allowed the insurgents to operate independently of the urban centers and to match the Soviets in limited engagements. After 1985, the Soviets began transferring combat duties to the demoralized and ill-equipped Afghan military and, in 1987, announced a complete military withdrawal by the end of 1989. The conflict tarnished the USSR's diplomatic and military image, in part due to economic and military support for the Afghan rebels provided by the United States and a new ally: Pakistan.

“Gross Interference”: The United States and Pakistan

However, years before their eventual partnership regarding Afghanistan, there was considerable tension between the United States and Pakistan. National indignation following the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War catapulted Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, a social democrat, to power with the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in 1973. Bhutto was outwardly an American ally, but his reception to Soviet diplomacy and interest in nuclear weapons antagonized the United States. During the 1977 Pakistani election, during which the PPP was accused of fraud by the opposition coalition, Bhutto placed the blame on “gross interference” by Washington (Rotramel & Howard, 2010, Document 246). Such was Bhutto's opinion of the US-Pakistani relationship in May 1977 that, should Carter not solidify his support, Pakistan would withdraw from the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and treat with the USSR (Rotramel & Howard, 2010, Document 250).

However, Bhutto's domestic affairs were not entirely in his favor. The PPP's push for land reforms and economic nationalization, championing “Socialism, Islam, and Democracy,” failed to placate powerful Islamist opponents like the Jamaat-i-Islami (Kepel, 2002, p. 100). Even after Bhutto began catering to the religious and conservative base, most of his opponents had rallied within a rival coalition party, the Pakistan National Alliance (PNA). The furor of the religious right, coupled with corruption and the failure to resolve the 1977 electoral crisis, led to

Bhutto's ousting in July 1977 (Kepel, 2002, p. 100). His successor, General Zia-ul-Haq, earned only a portion of Carter's trust; throughout 1977 and 1978, the United States continued to oppose Pakistan's nuclear armament (Rotramel & Howard, 2010, Documents 270 and 274).

Pakistan's fortunes seemed to change after April 1978. After Taraki's communist coup in Afghanistan, Zia and Pakistani Foreign Minister Agha Shahi met regularly with U.S. officials. In a meeting with Secretary Vance May 29, Shahi described "a grim picture of the Soviet/Afghan threat," specifically to Pakistan (Rotramel & Howard, 2010, Document 281). Afghanistan, as Shahi claimed, was only a springboard for a coup against Zia, who faced his own leftist opponents. Vance, in turn, advised Carter to sell fighter aircraft to Pakistan. In his undated memorandum to Carter, Vance argued that the sale would be a "major sign of [American] interest" in South Asia's security following the Afghan coup (Rotramel & Howard, 2010, Document 291). Within the year, the National Security Council (NSC) and Congress approved the sale, as well as resumed economic and military aid should Pakistan lean towards non-proliferation.

Regional unrest in late 1978 only accelerated the United States' reconciliation with Pakistan. Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, Carter feared a domino effect of anti-Western regimes across the Persian Gulf. On January 1, 1979, the President tasked Secretary Vance and Brzezinski to "start an all-out effort" to warm relations with Pakistan and contain Afghanistan (Riedel, 2014, p. 98). Despite continued disputes over Pakistan's proliferation, the United States increased its intelligence efforts in Afghanistan. The White House officially opposed the support of guerrillas, but by April, Brzezinski had already approved support for Afghans "determined to preserve their country's independence" (Rotramel & Howard, 2010, Document 333; Brzezinski, 1983, p. 427).

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, coordinated U.S. aid for the Afghan Mujahedeen began in July 1979. An initial "presidential finding" provided the CIA \$500,000 to support propaganda and psychological operations in the region, alongside providing medicine and radios for the Afghan rebels (Riedel, 2014, p. 99; Coll, 2005, p. 46). Toward the end of 1979, the United States and Pakistan had also secured the aid of several Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia. Beyond matching the monetary aid of the United States and Pakistan, the Gulf partners would also provide training to the Mujahedeen alongside Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and CIA agents. In October, the U.S. secured another \$695,000 in non-military

supplies for the Afghans, with most of, if not all, the funds moving through intermediaries in the ISI.

From here, it is important to note the centrality of the Pakistani government in the US-Mujahedeen connection. Between April and May 1979, the ISI played a key role in connecting American embassy and intelligence officials with Pakistan's favored insurgent groups. According to an ISI agent interviewed in 1988, these included figures like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of the Islamist resistance group Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin (HIG) (Rotramel & Howard, 2010, Document 339; Galster, 2001, para. 41-42). The HIG, alongside Abdul Rasul Sayyaf's Ittehad-e-Islami, Burhanuddin Rabbani's Jamiat, and Mulavi Khalis's Hezb-e-Islami (HIK), were explicitly Islamist organizations, rather than religiously-inspired monarchists or nationalists. Their connections to Maududi's JI, Saudi Wahhabists, and the Deobandi provided them augmented support beyond what the American alliance had offered. Still, they received the bulk of foreign support and became four of the Peshawar Seven—the seven Mujahedeen forces Zia-ul-Haq chose to provide American aid. Other groups, including nationalists and left-wing anti-communists, were denied even a small portion of the aid (Kepel, 2002, p. 143; Rutting, 2006, p. 10).

“We win and they lose”: Reagan's Cold War in Afghanistan

As Carter's presidency gave way to Reagan's, this bounty grew considerably. Between 1977 and 1981, the national defense budget rose from \$126 billion to \$162 billion. After entering office, Reagan upped the ante by proposing to increase spending to \$343 billion by 1986 (Thurow, 1981). In relation to the Soviet-Afghan conflict, Reagan's spending coincided with a new round of lucrative aid packages; in September 1981, over a year after Pakistan rejected a \$400-million deal from Carter, Reagan and Zia agreed to a six-year, \$3.2 billion military and economic aid package (Gwertzman, 1981). In 1987, Reagan offered another six-year deal amounting to over \$4.2 billion, alongside over \$630 million a year for the Afghan Mujahedeen. In National Security Decision Directives from 1984, the Reagan White House emphasized improving and normalizing relations with Pakistan. In National Security Decision Directive 147, from October 1984, the NSC placed providing “support...to maintain active Pakistani involvement in our Afghan policy” as its first objective (Executive Office of the President, 1984, p. 2).

The use of “our” by NSDD 147 is important for its implications for American policy. By

the mid-1980s, American policymakers were increasingly viewing the conflict in Afghanistan as an American project rather than a Pakistani one. Even the British and the Chinese, whom Carter had recruited following the 1980 Olympics boycott, had only a minor role Operation Cyclone—the CIA’s operation for arming the Mujahedeen (Riedel, 2014, pp. 104-107). Effectively, Reagan and the NSC had adopted the Soviet-Afghan War as another Cold War proxy battle against the Soviets. Under Reagan, directives like NSDD 75 and 99 made explicit and antagonistic opposition to the USSR official policy. The Reagan Doctrine, as journalist Charles Krauthammer had christened it in 1985, advocated a complete end to Soviet influence globally. In Reagan’s own words, the plan was simple: “We win and they lose” (Allen, 2000).

As for Operation Cyclone, Reagan’s presidency led to the program’s rapid expansion. Pushed by congressional leaders like Texan Charlie Wilson, funding for the CIA’s activities in Afghanistan ballooned between 1981 and 1985. Using excess funds reallocated from the Department of Defense, the CIA’s budget swelled to \$250 million in October 1985 from \$30 million in 1981, with a further \$250 million being matched by Saudi Arabia (Coll, 2005, pp. 101-102). To justify the escalation, CIA Director William Casey and others pushed for NSDD 166, a new policy strategy for Afghanistan. The policy, beyond reinforcing American commitments, also paved the way for a direct CIA-Mujahedeen relationship. Before the year was out, the CIA was aiding the Mujahedeen independent of ISI control (Coll, 2005, pp. 127-128).

This independence was well appreciated, but American aid rarely traveled beyond the groups already supported by Pakistan. Islamist leaders like Hekmatyar, Khalis, Rabbani continued to receive the bulk of funding after 1985, including advanced American weaponry like the FIM-92 Stinger (Bergen, 2002, pp. 76-77; Coll, 2005, p. 131). Within a year of NSDD 166, the three insurgent leaders were meeting with American officials, including Khalis’ meeting with Reagan in October 1985. In contrast, moderates, including monarchists and leftists, were given little attention. These groups lobbied extensively in Washington after being ostracized by ISI, but their efforts only persuaded the CIA that factionalism plagued the Afghan insurgency. The most successful moderate faction, Ahmad Shah Massoud’s Shura-e Nazar, received a fraction of the aid the HIG and Jamiat were receiving.

In the waning years of the war, the CIA continued to back their Islamist proxies despite congressional dissent. By then, Hekmatyar’s reputation for targeting Afghan allies had reached Washington, but the CIA were adamant that the Islamists were simply the most effective

fighters; ISI's support for them was out of pragmatism, not a concerted effort to rig Afghan politics (Bergen, 2002, pp. 73-74; Coll, 2005, p. 65). Reports that Afghan refugees largely resented the Islamist factions, or that the ISI was coordinating with Hekmatyar to eliminate rival factions, were swept under the rug. When Edmund McWilliams, a Foreign Service officer assigned to Islamabad, brought these accusations to Washington, the CIA pushed for him to be reprimanded and reposted (Coll, 2005, pp. 185-199). As the Soviets gave full combat duties to Mohammed Najibullah's government in 1989, the United States continued to rely on Afghanistan's Islamist Mujahedeen.

Conclusion

Over the course of the Soviet-Afghan War, almost \$3 billion in aid was funneled to the Mujahedeen, whether through the ISI or the United States directly. At least 90,000 Afghan insurgents were killed and wounded in the conflict, alongside almost ten million Afghan civilians that were killed, wounded, or forced to flee their homes. The Soviet withdrawal, rather than bring peace, only continued the conflict. Najibullah's government and Mujahedeen forces would continue to battle into 1992, but for the United States, the job was practically finished. The CIA never intended Operation Cyclone to evolve into a reconstruction effort. Washington had achieved its objectives: Pakistan had grown closer to the U.S. and the USSR was effectively crippled by its quagmire in Afghanistan. Even though George H. W. Bush would reverse Carter and Reagan's policies by passing sanctions on Pakistan in 1990, Afghanistan continued to represent a Cold War triumph.

As for the Mujahedeen, their Cold War role ended swiftly. Though the U.S. would continue to treat with Afghans hostile to Najibullah's regime, extremists like Hekmatyar were cut off from American funding shortly after 1990 (Kepel, 2002, p. 149). However, over a decade of funding from both the CIA and the ISI had already altered the Mujahedeen. The surplus of radicalized fighters, determined leadership, and advanced weapons allowed the Islamist Mujahedeen to challenge forces far larger and more advanced than Najibullah's regime. Between 1989 and 2001, the volatile mix left behind by the U.S. and nurtured by Pakistan would evolve, both militarily and politically, into the first stirrings of the Afghan Taliban.

This evolution would not have been possible without Washington's deference to Islamabad in funding the Afghan insurgents. By using ISI intermediaries to maintain plausible deniability, the United States effectively gave the former free reign in picking its Mujahedeen

clients. As Galster (2001) notes, the ISI continuously advised American officials that Hekmatyar and his ilk were simply the most effective insurgent forces (para. 61). Even CIA officials in Islamabad, who were the closest Americans to Hekmatyar, were more concerned with his efficiency than his long-term objectives. In crude terms, the Islamists simply killed more Soviets than the moderates did (Coll, 2005, pp. 164-165).

This deference, coupled with the United States' disinterest in Afghan stability, created the perfect ground in which al-Qaeda and the Taliban could flourish during the 1990s. Focused on solidifying relations with Pakistan and opposing the Soviets, Carter and Reagan were prepared to bankroll whatever projects were necessary. More importantly, ISI's majority share in arming the Mujahedeen, coupled with Pakistan's vested interest in an Islamist ally in Afghanistan, allowed weapons to go to devoutly Islamist factions. Even after Zia was succeeded by Benazir Bhutto in 1988, her staunch criticism of Pakistan's Afghan policy did nothing to stem ISI's support for the Islamists (Kepel, 2002, 149).

After fixating on South Asian diplomacy and Cold War politics, the United States was largely ignorant of the threat it had created in Afghanistan. Though Carter and Reagan achieved warmer relations with Pakistan and a triumph over the Soviet, their policies towards the Mujahedeen were blinded by these larger objectives. At best, the White House's pragmatism prioritized Soviet casualties over a long-term peace in Afghanistan; at worst, it was blinded by—or tolerant of—Pakistan's policy agenda. In the world that came after the Cold War, there was little care paid to Afghanistan. As Milton Bearden, the CIA station chief in Islamabad, recalled, "Did we really [care] about the long-term future of [Afghanistan]? Maybe not. As it turned out...we didn't" (as cited in Coll, 2005, p. 173).

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